

ACTION FOR LIFE NEWSLETTER #9
Thiruvananthapuram, 18th January 2004

Dear Friends,

Now that our team is spread across India, these weekly newsletters will rotate between the three different groups. We begin with news from the south India team, who were the first to leave Asia Plateau - on 12th January.

Those who had not travelled on an Indian train were greatly relieved to know that it could be a pleasurable experience. It was not crowded and we were able to have a restful night on our bunks. For the rest of the 20-hour journey we enjoyed games, songs, reading, and watching India roll by outside. At most stations vendors were eager to sell food, drink, books, toys and more.

Bangalore is known as the garden city of India. Located approx. 1000 metres above sea level it has a very pleasant climate. It was originally known as the retirement capital of India but is now better known as the home of many high tech companies. This is a blessing for those looking for work but it has created a high-stress environment with a high suicide rate. The city itself is wonderful, when compared with Mumbai and Pune - the streets are wide, the traffic flows freely most of the time, and there are luxuries such as parks and pavements!

During our time there we visited Mobility India, which is an organization helping people who have lost limbs or have other walking disabilities. They are proud that over 60% of the staff are themselves disabled. It was fascinating watching some ladies making feet using moulds. In another section a boy with withered legs was being cared for by six experts and an old man was having a new limb attached. They are also proud of the fact that they make everything locally and are even able to export.

Another day we interacted with the clients at a home for mentally disturbed adults - the first of its kind in India. We were asked to introduce ourselves and to provide musical entertainment. One lady refused to give her name - she said she had forgotten it. After a few songs, however, she smiled and her feet started to tap. In some ways we felt out of our depth with these people but sensed their appreciation as trust between us grew.

The highlight of our visit to Bangalore was attending a weekend seminar on "Emerging Global Order and Disorder", organized by the students in the Peace Studies honours programme at St. Joseph's College. We were welcome to all the sessions, and the students and Professor Jerome (the organizer) were delighted with the international flavour we brought. The calibre of the speakers was excellent and we learnt much about India. Over meals (served with white gloves!) we got to know the students better. At the end of the seminar they invited us to do a presentation. We gave ourselves the challenge of introducing ourselves by highlighting a turning point in our lives in less than 60 seconds. We invited them to have a quiet time with us and then had a time of sharing. Many opened up about the fears and blockages in their lives. This led later to some meaningful one-to-one exchanges. We look forward to going deeper with them when we return to Bangalore for the month of February.

Our next stop in southern India was Alleppey where we were met by Dr. S.K. Ramachandran Nair, a neurosurgeon. He had arranged for us to take a leisurely boat ride through the famous backwaters of Kerala. The view was stunning as we moved through the interlocking canals, rivers and lakes. As we glided along Dr. Nair read correspondence to us, between himself and old friends, to show how grateful he had been for his early touches with MRA.

We stopped at a small farmhouse on the bank of a canal and had fresh coconut juice. As we drank we watched the famous houseboats floating by in a silent flotilla. They looked like something from ancient Egypt with their upper structures made of local reeds. What a great way to have a restful holiday...

That evening we travelled to Ambalapuzha where we met a famous Gandhian activist and saw a Kathakali dance performance. It was held in a huge temple complex in which a magnificently adorned elephant led the opening procession. We felt privileged to be invited backstage before the play started to witness part of the three hour make-up extravaganza. Tired from all our travel though we only managed one hour of Lord Krishna's story which went on into the small hours of the morning.

The next day was fascinating as we moved by bus from one location to another. Each time we joined different groups of people the same guru would appear - a famous religious leader from northern Kerala. His basic message (translated from Malayalam) was one of universal love, sharing, compassion etc. He gave a number of interesting illustrations; one dealt with the banana tree, which he said represented total sacrifice as not a single part of the banana plant is wasted as it can be used for so many different things - even its flower can be made into a curry. At one of event we were asked to say why we had joined Action for Life. At the end a man stood up and said it had been the best event he had ever been to in his life.

As the day drew to a close we reached our destination in Thiruvananthapuram where we are staying with Dr. Nair and his friends. Glenys and Peter Wood are staying with Mrs. George John, who travelled with Glenys many years ago in "India Arise." After a few minutes of relaxation we set off for "Abhaya", which is an organization started by Smt. Sugatha Kumari, the Poet Laureate of Kerala. She is a dynamic lady who has been battling for years for the rights of women and the disadvantaged. She has homes for both destitute women and young girls. In the grounds is a Bodhi tree planted by the Dalai Lama who, being homeless himself, had tears in his eyes when he opened the centre.

The next day we were invited to visit a school run by Sister Mythili. It was a special day as it was the anniversary of the death of the founder. All day long pupils sang songs and hymns from the various faiths, and all the while people were spinning cotton in the traditional way as the school is run on the basis of Gandhian philosophy. After our presentation the students were told they could go home but none of them wanted to as they preferred to stay and chat.

On our way home we spent time sitting on rocks overlooking the Arabian Sea, and watching the sunset. It was so beautiful and peaceful. Wambui was impressed that there was no land between here and her homeland of Africa. Today is a day of rest so some have gone to the seaside, while others are exploring the city or relaxing. Early tomorrow we leave for Kottayam where no doubt many more surprises await us!

With best wishes,

The "south" team

Peter Heyes (Canada), Nigel Heywood (Australia), Shabeen Hussain (India), Aparna Khatri(Fiji), Vuth Kim (Cambodia), Chris Lancaster (Australia), Ngan Le (Vietnam), Nandor Lim (Malaysia), Ren-Jou Liu (Taiwan), Wambui Nguyo (Kenya), Naro Thiek (India), Laura Trevelyan (UK), Peter & Glenys Wood (NZ), Katia Ziryanova (Russia).